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SAMUEL BUTLER

BY CLARA GRUENING STILLMAN

It is now some thirteen years since Samuel Butler died, after a life of brilliant activity in many fields of literary and artistic expression. His novel, *The Way of All Flesh*, his satires, his biological writings, his attitude towards many philosophical and social problems, anticipated by a generation at least the trend of opinion. Practically unknown during his life, and when known largely misunderstood and disliked, he is now barely beginning the slow conquest of his rightful place as a bold and subtle thinker, one of the most original and creative minds of his time.

The qualities that made Butler unpopular in his lifetime are the extremely elusive character of his satire, his fondness for paradox, the strange views and apparent inconsistencies which he defended so ardently, and the multiplicity of his interests, which gave to his work a superficial effect of diletantism. One might conceivably come upon chaos in trying to interpret the work of a man who painted pictures, composed music, wrote art criticism and travel sketches, worked up a voluminous biography of his grandfather, published a commentary on Shakespeare's Sonnets, translated the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* (advancing and defending the hypothesis that the *Odyssey* was the work of a woman), wrote four highly controversial books on evolution, three satires (two of which at least are worthy to rank with the work of Swift), several very respectable sonnets, and an absorbing autobiographic and sociological novel. Add to this his audacity in attacking single-handed—with no weapons but his keen commonsense and the charm and pointed brilliancy of his style—the “vested interests” of religion and science, and we may understand that most of his critics either hated or mistrusted him because they completely failed to grasp what he was driving at. So it was that this man, who broke

a lance with every aspect of orthodoxy except the political, could be variously described as "a typical middle-class Englishman," "a hedonist and an advocate of compromise," "a true Christian," and a "clever trickster" bent only upon dazzling and bewildering, with nothing of importance to say.

Butler had very definite things to say, and he was so imbued with their importance that he said them over and over, seriously or humorously, brusquely or suavely, literally or figuratively, as his mood demanded. But he pursued his purpose from so many angles, he was so rich in illustration, so fond of playing with ideas, of turning them inside out, of showing how inevitably they contained in themselves their own contradictions: his hatred of dogmatism and his keen self-criticism led him to show up so ruthlessly the weak spots even of his own favorite notions, that he often seemed to be arguing against himself. His sensitiveness to the subtlety of words often led him to discuss one class of ideas in the terms of another. He was fond of talking biology in the language of religion and religion in the language of science. But this was far more than mere verbal play. It sprang from his deeply monistic attitude, his strong sense of the oneness of all aspects of life and of the illumination to be gained by interpreting them by each other.

Butler was pre-eminently a biologist. His biological theories are the key to his social and religious views; his philosophy of life was built up with an almost architectural harmoniousness from his conception of the nature of life and of its evolution from forms so low that we do not even recognize it there, to the high complexities of modern social organization. His artistic and literary criticism has no special interest for us now except in that it carries his crotchety charm and illustrates the curious contradictions in his unusual and interesting personality. He was either unable or unwilling to understand the spirit of modern art or music, harking back to the past for his favorites. In literature he preferred Homer and Shakespeare, and bestowed an impartial and cordial dislike on most of his own contemporaries. This odd antiquarian streak in his nature was perhaps emphasized by his personal isolation from the political and literary currents of his time. But this only throws into high relief the extraordinary originality and keenness of his mind, which gave perhaps the first literary expression in

England to that "revolt of the Life Force against ready-made morality" (and, in fact, against ready-made ideas of any kind) of which Bernard Shaw speaks in the Preface to *The Irrational Knot*.

Butler was born in 1835 and died in 1902. His adult life began in the days when the famous "fight between science and religion" was ranging men the world over into two irreconcilable camps of Darwinians and religionists. Characteristically, he began his career by casting a stone into both camps, and thus making bitter enemies in the two powerful intellectual factions of his day. Reared in an orthodox household, the son and grandson of a clergyman, he had been destined for the Church and had actually begun to prepare for ordination. It was not long before he conceived doubts concerning various articles of faith, with the result that instead of becoming a curate he sailed away to New Zealand to start a sheep farm and read *The Origin of Species*. Both activities were momentous. The sheep farming plus a good many other things produced *Erewhon*, while his reading of Darwin made him for six months an ardent Darwinian and for the rest of his life an active opponent of the mechanistic interpretation of life which Darwin's insistence on Natural Selection implied.

With the exception of *Erewhon Revisited*, all Butler's important work was done in the fifteen years between the appearance of *Erewhon* in 1872 and of *Luck or Cunning?* in 1887. Into this period fall all his biological works, his attacks on religious dogma, and the brilliant fragments of social philosophy and satire scattered through *Erewhon* and *The Way of All Flesh*, his one novel, written from 1870 to 1884, but not published until after his death.

In *Erewhon* Butler had already outlined quite definitely many of the views which later were more fully elaborated, to bring down upon him a course of "sneer, snarl and misrepresentation" amounting to "practical boycott" (Note-books). Oddly enough it was an unexpected success—the most successful of all Butler's books during his life. This popularity he attributed to the fact that it had appeared anonymously, thus presenting the double interest of a "new and an unknown voice"; and no doubt, also, people were ready to accept, in the guise of fantasy, reflections on church and state, on education and science and family life, which they indignantly rejected when put forth seriously and au-

thoritatively. Then too, the satire in *Erewhon* was more general and more diffused, its implications not so clear as in his later works, if indeed it was generally understood at all. Butler's peculiar method of presenting his real views in mock support of some absurd conclusion, of changing back and forth—sometimes several times in a single argument—from ironic praise of what is, to ironically expressed suggestion of what should be, is decidedly baffling until one gets used to it, when it may become very fascinating. Certainly the public which received his next book, *The Fair Haven* (1873), had become so little used to it that this elaborate and erudite hoax was taken seriously by a large number of people—including a prominent clergyman who sent it to a friend whom he wished to convert—and several reviewers of religious publications. Of course these people never forgave Butler for having made fools of them. The distrust and contempt with which his later works were received no doubt had its origin here. Purporting to be “A Work in Defense of the Miraculous Element in Our Lord's Ministry Upon Earth,” the book is in reality an ironical analysis of all the arguments advanced by theologians to justify belief in the supernatural, and a pretended refutation of all unbelievers. With such two-edged satire Butler was in his element, and he let himself go with infinite relish. Mr. Streatfield, his literary executor, assures us that Butler never intended *The Fair Haven* as a hoax, but “fully expected his readers to comprehend his irony, and anticipated that some at least would keenly resent it.” Many years later he used the same theme, the development of a miracle myth in fictional form, in *Erewhon Revisited*, in some respects perhaps his most delightful book.

Five years after *The Fair Haven*, Butler published *Life and Habit*, the first and most important of his works on evolution and the foundation for all the others. He had already, in *Erewhon* and in an earlier essay published in a New Zealand paper, discussed machines as supplementary limbs which increase man's power and react upon his development. He now proposed to himself “to see not only machines as limbs, but also limbs as machines. I felt immediately,” he writes (*Unconscious Memory*, Ch. II. “How I Wrote Life and Habit”), “that I was upon firmer ground. The use of the word ‘organ’ for a limb told its own story; the word could not have become so current under this meaning unless the idea of a limb as a tool or machine had been

agreeable to commonsense. What would follow, then, if we regarded our limbs and organs as things we had ourselves manufactured for our own convenience? The first question that suggested itself was, how did we come to make them without knowing anything about it? And this raised another, namely, how comes anybody to do anything unconsciously? The answer 'habit' was not far to seek." Butler then pointed out the unconsciousness with which habitual actions are performed, the unconsciousness increasing with the perfection of our knowledge, so that we are most conscious of and have most control over such habits as speech, the upright position, the arts and sciences, which are peculiar to the human race and always acquired after birth; less conscious of and less able to control our eating and drinking, swallowing, seeing and hearing,—habits comparatively recent, geologically speaking, but still acquired in our prehuman ancestry and fairly familiar to us at birth; least conscious, finally, and least able to control our digestion and circulation, the most ancient habits of the race, belonging even to our invertebrate ancestry.

What is race experience, Butler asked, but the memory of past acts? But how can the individual remember the experience of the race unless he actually took part in that experience himself? It follows that parents and offspring are one in personality, in the same sense that a man is one with his past self of thirty, fifty or eighty years back. The generations are to life what phases of personality are to the individual. "We are all one animal."

The memory on the part of the offspring of actions which it performed in the persons of its forefathers is latent until it is rekindled by a recurrence of the associated ideas: that is to say, until it finds itself in a situation similar to that in which its parents performed the action. It is this constant repetition of similar actions under similar conditions that gives us the stable, hereditary factor in evolution. But it happens also that the situation constantly recurs in a slightly modified form, and it will be necessary for the individual to add to its store of memory a new element to cope with the new fact. It is out of this "sense of need" that the variational factor arises.

Evolution is thus not the result of fortuitous and yet mechanical natural selection acting upon the individual from without. It is produced by the faith of the individual him-

self, "the desire to know, to do, to live at all," the will or "sense of need" to master the constantly arising new. Thus it is teleological—though not in the old Lamarckian sense—that its purpose is predetermined and imposed by a Creator and Ruler who is not an organism. Butler means by purpose the purpose of the creature itself, a purpose it exerts at each step of the way even though it does not know what the next step or succeeding steps may be. He illustrates his meaning very clearly when he says that the man who invented the water kettle did so with a purpose, although he had no conception of a steam engine. Nevertheless the kettle is a necessary step in the evolution of the engine.

This was the beginning of the controversy with Darwin, which later became, unfortunately, personal as well as scientific. Undoubtedly Butler had grounds for indignation at the way in which he was ignored by Darwin and his followers, even by those whose own works supported him in one point or another. He had retained a profound admiration for Darwin even after the first divergence from his views, and in *Life and Habit* pointed out that whatever imperfections might in the future be found in the theory of natural selection, however much the vitalistic view of evolution might gain in importance and the inheritance of acquired characters come to be recognized, the glory of having "taught people to believe in evolution," and of having accumulated the multitudinous facts by means of which the teaching had been done, would always be Darwin's. Butler was so far from feeling any hostility at this time that he expected "that *Life and Habit* was going to be an adjunct to Darwinism which no one would welcome more gladly than Mr. Darwin himself."

He was doomed to be bitterly disappointed. His book, we are told by Professor Hartog (in his Introduction to *Unconscious Memory*), "was received by professional biologists as a gigantic joke—a joke, moreover, not in the best possible taste. True, its central ideas, largely those of Lamarck, had been presented by Hering in 1870 (as Butler found shortly after his publication); they had been favorably received, developed by Haeckel, expounded and praised by Ray Lankester. Coming from Butler they met with contumely, even from such men as Romanes, who, as Butler had no difficulty in proving, were unconsciously inspired by the same ideas. . . .

“ It is easy, looking back, to see why *Life and Habit* so missed its mark. . . . Butler introduced himself as what we now call ‘ The Man in the Street,’ far too bare of scientific clothing to satisfy the Mrs. Grundy of the domain: lacking all recognized tools of science and all sense of the difficulties in his way, he proceeded to tackle the problems of science with little save the deft pen of the literary expert in his hand. His very failure to appreciate the difficulties gave greater power to his work. . . .”

It is true that Butler knew no hesitation in following wherever his mind led him, even if it carried him in opposition to the very seats of the mighty. His conviction that truth is not absolute and can never be the exclusive property of any one, and his confidence in the sanity and integrity of his own mind, often helped him to rush in where men of science feared to tread. He had “ no wish to instruct,” but he proposed to “ write about Mr. Darwin’s work exactly as I should about any one else’s.” (*Unconscious Memory*, Ch. II). At the same time he never felt any “ vested interest ” in his own ideas merely because they were his. He had reached his conclusions on the nature of heredity “ by the exercise of a little commonsense while regarding certain facts which are open to everyone,” and he was always ready, as he said of some one else, “ to jump on his dead selves to some tune.”

With the publication of *Evolution Old and New* the break between Butler and Darwin became complete. Butler had gone back to the forgotten and discredited works of Buffon, Erasmus, Darwin and Lamarck and presented them to the world anew not only as pioneers of the very school which now chose to ignore their existence, but as distinctly in advance of it in several particulars, coupling his analysis of their work with the unequivocal charge that Darwin had consciously refrained from giving them the credit that was their due. This sort of injustice roused Butler to the pitch of fury. He was, in all big matters, the most generous of men, and he did not understand that not lack of candor, but actual ignorance and immersion in technical detail, might be the comparatively innocent causes of a very real neglect. Even the bitter tone which his polemic had now assumed was not the result of personal pique. It was due to a sense of outrage at what seemed to him the crime of crimes: the failure to keep the mind open to all truths old and new, and to acknowl-

edge the source whence they came; the fossilization of the spirit into a sterile academicism. He would even "view with dismay the abolition of the Church of England, as knowing that a blatant, bastard science would instantly step into her shoes." The man of science was only "the cleric in his latest development."

In *Unconscious Memory* Butler developed the main idea of *Life and Habit* and definitely connected his views with those of Hering. In *Luck or Cunning?* he further emphasized the nature of heredity as unconscious memory, and elaborated the conception of purpose or "cunning" as the force that makes life evolve and vary. Finally in *The Deadlock in Darwinism*, an essay, there is additional criticism of Darwin, Wallace, and Weismann.

Whatever the imperfections in Butler's theory, and however unfortunate may have been the conditions attending its publication, his work was so far from deserving the treatment it received that it has pointed out the way for much post-Darwinian criticism, and for most modern vitalistic hypotheses. Of late even the highest official recognition has not been lacking. In a volume on *Darwin and Modern Science* published in 1908 by the Cambridge University Press in commemoration of the centenary of Charles Darwin, Professor W. Bateson, F.R.S., contributes an essay on *Heredity and Variation in Modern Lights* in which he refers to Butler as one of Darwin's most brilliant critics, while Sir Francis Darwin in an address before the British Association paid Butler the tribute of tracing his theory of heredity from Hering and Butler through the work of such men as Rignano and Semon, and expressed himself in agreement with it. The *Living Age* for October 17, 1908, makes the comment that "Mr. F. Darwin brings to his assistance for interpreting the actions of plants and lowest animal forms such terms as 'habit' and 'memory,' taken directly from psychology. 'In all living things there is something psychic . . . we must believe that in plants there exists a faint copy of what we know as consciousness in ourselves.'" This is of course pure Butlerism.

Butler had no effect on the biologists of his day, but it has not taken very long for his ideas to become incorporated in the scientific thought of ours, so close to his as to be really still a part of it. Much of this has happened by the inevitable development of ideas, often without direct inspiration from

him, more often still without recognition. Still it will hardly be necessary for a future Butler to do for him what he did for the pre-Darwinian evolutionists. His reputation is in the ascendant not only as a scientist among scientists, but as novelist, satirist, sociologist, with the general public as well. His social philosophy, which so puzzled his critics, will not seem incomprehensible or inconsistent when we remember that Butler was a highly original conservative as well as innovator, and that he viewed the process of social change from the viewpoint of the biologist. He believed that we must vary, but that we must vary by infinitesimal degrees, "nature seeming equally to hate too wide a deviation from our ordinary practice, and no deviation at all." If the change is too great the creature is at a loss how to meet it, because there is nothing in its store of memories to which it can refer, and a too sudden change in the social structure could not be assimilated by society any more than a too sudden change in physical conditions by the individual organism. We are not left to infer the social application. Butler was careful to point it out himself.

It was no doubt this attitude that led to his contempt for propagandists, persons with "causes." They seemed to him to be trying to push down people's throats things for which they were not ready. He felt that the truth could be trusted to establish itself under the most adverse conditions, and somewhat perversely desired the conditions to be as adverse as possible as a test for the value of the truth in question. Thus, "Truth is like money—lightly come, lightly go; and if she cannot hold her own against even gross misrepresentation, she is herself not worth holding." This is what he meant, too, in his frequent references to the necessity of pleasing the average person, the "nice" person, references which were so generally interpreted as advocacies of base compromise. It is true that Butler was sometimes extremely whimsical in his choice of the particular compromise he chose to offer, but the point he was trying to make, and which he did make in spite of minor inconsistencies, is that a social or spiritual change has not really taken place so long as it exists only in the consciousness of the intellectual leaders of the world. Not until it has been so thoroughly democratized that it becomes the daily bread, the blood and bone, of the people, has it really arrived; and unless the many can assimilate it, the vision of the few will have been in vain.

To the radical it may seem that Butler made the mistake common to biologists of applying the formulae of natural science somewhat too rigidly to social conditions. Perhaps it would be more correct to say that he did not apply them extensively enough. In biology he had recognized the mutations that occur at long intervals during which there is no apparent change, and suggested that the period of quiescence was one of preparation, and that the "sport," springing full-fledged from the race without observable antecedents, was but the visible consummation of a long and secret growth—a perfect biological sanction for the social revolution which may burst forth, not by chance, as it often seems to, but at the exact moment of ripeness.

So much for the more conservative side of Butler's sociology. He had held aloof from the social and political turmoil of his time. The Socialist revival of the eighties, the "cart and trumpet" campaigns glorified by Bernard Shaw, the woman's movement, passed him by without apparently touching him. Nevertheless, whenever he does turn from the consideration of how change takes place, to the consideration of what specific change may come, he is invariably so far ahead of his time that the present generation, while it has absorbed many of his views, has in some cases but barely and tentatively, in others not yet at all, begun to put them into practice. This is true of his opinions concerning disease and crime, education, the relations of parents and children, and the effect of institutions on human nature. This last was undoubtedly Butler's most radical contribution. It was of course not new, having been stated by Marx and others as part of the theory of the economic basis of social progress, and is today a commonplace of college text-books; but Butler undoubtedly worked it out for himself and presented it in *Lucubratio Ebria*, an early essay, and elsewhere in a characteristically original fashion.

It is rather unfortunate that Butler's friends should have striven so hard to prove that he was a religious man in any sense in which the Church could accept that term. They reiterate that he was a broad Churchman and a communicant, and that he frequently used such expressions as "God" and "the unseen world." Perhaps he was, and undoubtedly he did, but it is hard to understand how anyone who has read Butler's essay, *God the Known and God the Unknown*, which appeared in *The Examiner* in 1879, after he had published

The Fair Haven and *Life and Habit*, and which is his mature and fully considered Credo, could seriously put forth such a claim. His religion, if one may call it such, can hardly be distinguished from his biology. "God is the animal and vegetable world and the animal and vegetable world is God. . . . There is no living organism untenanted by the Spirit of God, nor any Spirit of God perceivable by man apart from organism embodying and expressing it. . . . All living forms . . . are in reality one animal; we and the mosses being part of the same vast person in no figurative sense, but with as much bona fide literal truth as when we say that a man's finger nails and his eyes are parts of the same man. It is in this Person that we may see the Body of God—and in the evolution of this Person, the mystery of His Incarnation."

Butler has somewhere applied to himself the saying of Dante: "This is no book. Who touches this touches a man"; and this effect of direct contact with a fascinating personality, and a sense of traveling widely and living intensely, is produced by almost everything he wrote. He has the power of infinite suggestion, making one feel alive and creative with the high joy of mental stimulation. This is, of course, at his best. He was uneven, and his fondness for verbal cleverness sometimes ran away with him. By dint of expressing truths as paradoxes he sometimes slipped into offering the paradox without the truth. But this is on the whole unimportant. His scientific works are practically free from this defect. The greatest thing about him was his hatred of shams and dogmatisms, his most important contribution as a philosophical idea is the unabsoluteness of truth, the eternal "contradiction in terms," as he calls it, of nature. This was perhaps a rather inadequate expression of a big idea. It was not merely the contradiction in terms but in the realities of nature—the melting boundaries, the continual interpenetration of life and death, the eternal is and is not in everything. Some of his finest aphorisms—and he had a genius for making fine ones—are on the elusiveness of truth. "Truth is like a photographic sensitized plate which is equally ruined by over and under exposure, and the just exposure for which can never be absolutely determined."

In his own life Butler rather splendidly contradicted the effect of compromise and undue moderation that some of his writing suggested. He was himself one of those propa-

gandists for whom he expressed such hearty contempt, though he eschewed causes and worked as a solitary individual, holding as his sole dogma that the mind must be free from dogma, and as his only formula that there is no formula. In his time he suffered as much neglect, misunderstanding, and misrepresentation as any revolutionist could hope for. He said that one could not appeal both to one's own time and to posterity, and that he preferred the recognition of posterity. For this he consciously worked and hoped, and it looks now as if posterity were deciding to accept him as its own. Though he founded no school and had no disciples (for it would hardly do to call even Bernard Shaw, who has frequently acknowledged his great indebtedness to Butler, and who is so like and so unlike him, a disciple), modern literature is full of Butlerisms; and contemporary thought, while it embraces a great deal that Butler did not touch upon, has yet in most cases taken the direction that he pointed out.

But better than such impersonal survival is the fact that Butler himself is growing familiar to us. That splendid and vivid truthfulness of his, that searching and stirring quality of his mind, his keen rationalism, his brilliant style and inimitable irony, are coming to be recognized as part of the treasure of our inheritance. He is being read and thought and talked about. He is living again in the minds of men and women, helping them to be free, stirring them to laughter and aspiration. This was what he wanted. He has entered upon the only immortality he craved and believed possible,—the immortality which, as he tells us in his sonnet, *The Life After Death*, the dead may find only “on lips of living men.”

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